

June 12, 1970

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ADDRESS

by

THE HONORABLE ROBERT H. FINCH
Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare

before the

CENTENNIAL COMMENCEMENT OF OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

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There was a time -- and not so long ago, as such things are counted -- when commencement addresses were a ritual of optimistic preachments. Graduates were solemnly assured that future leadership was theirs, and they had only to march resolutely forward to meet life's challenges ... like Parsifal approaching the Holy Grail.

They were urged -- be successful. Opportunities abound. Build a better mousetrap, dutifully clean out your "In" basket, and the world will amply reward your efforts.

Today, young Americans find the world already at their doorstep long before they can begin work on their mousetrap, and the "In" basket overflows with seemingly insuperable problems.

NOTE: Secretary Finch may depart from the prepared text, but it is authorized in its entirety.

In my own case, it was the Marine Corps out of high school in World War II and, after law school, recall to active duty during the Korean War. It is the same for many of you here today.

Time has passed, my generation is not new any more -- yet in one dimension, little has changed. There was a time when the world was at peace, but you and I have not known it first-hand.

But we have reason for optimism. I believe that your generation's agenda will be one of domestic renewal, and that must be the framework of all our hopes and dreams and plans -- starting now.

Ohio State began as one of the earliest of the "people's universities" -- a land-grant institution dedicated (in the words of Senator Morrill's original Act) to "the mechanic and practical arts and sciences". You have, for a century, fulfilled and expanded that purpose greatly. You do so today -- and so you will and must for a century, and a century more.

This is no mere rhetorical flourish. Just attempt to measure the value of this University in terms of scholarship

and careers and contributions to the greater community outside. Just attempt to measure the costs of closing this University down, whatever the cause or the issue.

In this Centennial Class of 1970, degrees will be awarded to some 350 agronomists and home economists ... to 850 teachers, 200 engineers, and 80 lawyers ... to 215 dentists and hygienists ... to 175 physicians and another 102 allied health professionals ... to 50 optometrists and 55 pharmacists -- and nearly two thousand bachelors, masters, and doctors in the arts and sciences.

These are the dimensions of but a year's loss in this University's annals -- and neither as individuals nor as members of society can we afford or even contemplate such costs.

We have come to the point, fortunately, where we distrust slogans. And because I am a carpetbagger in these parts, I am reluctant to comment on your problems. But I do not hesitate to comment on one part of a slogan now current on this campus -- KEEP IT OPEN! That you must do. And not just "you" the administration, or "you" the faculty, or "you" the students, or "you" the parents and alumni -- but all of you, and all of you together, as a single community of concern.

Behind recent headlines, we have to acknowledge, there is a residue of bitterness, confusion, and uncertainty. I

visited Kent State, I held a long conversation with the President of Jackson State, and these are indeed stunned communities. Hundreds of college and university delegations -- students, faculty, administrators -- have come to Washington, and scores have come to my office. A dialogue has begun, and already there is fuller understanding -- both ways. The lines of communication have been opened, but now they must remain open and be constantly improved.

Still further behind the headlines there have been other events and other lessons. From both extremes of the spectrum, the rhetoric has become inflamed .. and inflammatory. Words do have consequences, and sometimes they lead beyond anger to tragedy.

Neither extreme helps to explain or even describe events -- they simply perpetuate myths ... and such code-words as "the system" and "outside agitators". Both, on any scale of reason, represent "cop outs".

But new changes ... vastly significant changes ... also are taking place. The stable center has been catalyzed. There is a growing unity on many campuses, a drawing together of students, faculty, and administrators. And great numbers of concerned and moderate students have signaled their fierce commitment to becoming involved in politics ... within the system.

They are being joined by others, young and old, who find to their amazement that they have interests in common with students. In the re-ordering of the Nation's priorities, some would point to environmental concerns, and others to the drive toward racial justice -- and even others to the Women's Liberation Movement, for example. Each has his or her own "bag" -- but there are many different "bags" and they must not become mutually exclusive.

And there is another side to the coin -- disturbing, but no less part of the whole picture. Old fault-lines are widening, between young and old, town and gown ... and also within the generations. The cleavage is both horizontal and vertical. It cuts many ways. Many of the so-called "hard hats" are members of the students' own generation.

Some might be tempted to play down these recent events -- to write them off as another round of student unrest, or a particularly vigorous outbreak of spring fever. Or they might be characterized with scare-words, like "rebellion" and "revolution". Both views, I think, are wrong. The one suggests we have nothing to be concerned about -- the other, that it is too late to be concerned at all.

It is time, instead, to face hard reality ... to face the sheer fact that much has changed, both on and off the campus ... and to begin engaging in the compassionate criticism

that helps build and create. It is time, and then some, to put aside our futile yearnings for a "return to normalcy". Today's normalcy is rapid, ongoing change -- and the future for which we all must prepare is a moving and shifting constellation.

I want, first, to address some remarks to those of you who are not students -- for all of us must try to understand who students are and what it is they seek. We must be very careful and very discriminating about the role we conceive our colleges and universities should play in our national life.

To begin with, let's remember that students are not some sort of aliens traveling on foreign passports -- but our own children, and the products of our conduct, our laws and our mores. Let us examine our ideas and practices -- before discrediting theirs. Let us never make them the scapegoats for our own anxieties and fears.

Indeed, it is not easy for those who have struggled against economic adversity to understand others who seem blithely unconcerned about "making it" or whose life-style may outrage accepted senses of propriety. But adversity, let's remember, wears many faces. It can come in the form of draft notices and rejection slips as well as overdue bills. It can come in the absence of draft notices among those who know themselves to be privileged, and feel guilty because of it. And adversity can come, too, in the incessant pressure

for grades and degrees and credentials.

We must also recognize that today's students are ready to sacrifice -- that indeed they have laid on the line their academic standing, their career-hopes, even their physical safety, for their beliefs. They have shown us courage ... and staying power.

Now, it is perfectly true that students have no first lien on wisdom. They did not suddenly "discover" war, or hunger, or poverty, or racial injustice. But, as it always has been through history, they are the least able to compromise with injustice. They have no tolerance for race hatreds. They have no patience with the deferral of burning problems -- and they want to get on with the works of social renewal.

We should take students seriously, not because they are future voters or because they pose a threat to the democratic process -- but because they help voice the Nation's conscience. It slanders an entire generation to confuse a militant fringe with the vast preponderance of deeply concerned, genuinely motivated young citizens -- and it pushes them toward the extremists' arms and goals.

Last month in Oregon, it was the voters who lashed out -- and not alone against "disruptive students" but against all young people, age 19-to-21, who might have become voting citizens. The decision, in my view, was dead wrong. And to the extent that backlash played a part, it was for the wrong reason.

As I have argued for twenty-five years in public life, young people should have the vote -- and they should have it not as some sort of "sop". They should have the vote because they constitute a unique resource that should be brought into the democratic process.

In other States, colleges and universities themselves -- whole educational systems -- have become victims of the backlash, as if the problems of our society were somehow caused by the academic community and as if that community should be punished for having failed to solve them. It would be sheer disaster if rejected bond issues and a drying up of alumni support were to bring our colleges and universities to their knees. It was a disaster last week in my own State of California -- and a grievous setback to health care -- when a \$250 million bond issue for medical education was crushed, better than two-to-one.

I sometimes wonder -- do any of us appreciate the incredible burden we routinely put upon the university? We ask that it serve many masters -- government, business, the church, indeed the whole agenda of social needs -- and protect its basic integrity at the same time. We ask our campuses to be centers of innovation, criticism, and creativity -- the bulwarks of an exciting, pluralistic national life. We ask them on the one hand to remain above the battle, and on the other hand, to dig down into the agenda of unresolved social problems.

And then we turn on them, with anger and frustration, when they become focal points for all the conflicts and tensions that rage across the face of this society. Such backlash is mindless and irrational -- and it is, in the ultimate sense, self-defeating.

So, for all of us, the great effort must be to cultivate a sense of perspective and balance about students and the academic community -- and get on with the business of relating their concerns to the Nation's concerns.

We have to gain perspective on ourselves and come to grips with what one commentator has described as "future shock" -- that elemental psychic unease that besets us in the face of constant, unpredictable change. There seems to be an "adaptive range" above which or below which the individual's ability to cope simply comes apart.

Reality is unsettling -- so deny it. Novelty floods in on us -- so revert to a romantic groping for the past. Complexities pile up -- so seize upon panaceas and super-simplifications. Future shock threatens to separate us from our senses, from sanity and reason. As an entire society ... young and old ... we are threatened by this insidious form of dry-rot -- and the defenses against it must begin, for all of us, with the sense of perspective and balance to which I referred a moment ago.

Up to this point, my remarks have been addressed largely across the generation gap, and across the barrier between town and gown -- but now let me shift emphasis. I would like to try to speak more directly to you men and women of the graduating classes -- not with a pretentious guru-like ultimate wisdom, but in terms of profound hopes and concerns, and of ideals as well.

Your growing commitment to becoming involved in the political process is, for me, an exciting and a deeply encouraging phenomenon. And for those of you who do intend to get involved, I suspect you already understand that politics is a demanding pursuit. It calls for persistence. It is arduous, and there is much drudgery in it. Politics is an incremental process ... requiring dedication for the "long pull". Influence comes hard -- and it comes only to those who are willing to endure the rigors of the process.

This means that faddishness and "two week wonders" will not make much of a dent. There should be no expectations of easy or instant victories. Out on the hustings, you will meet with resistance. You will find that voting habits are deeply engrained -- and that "single issue" politics comes up hard against a panoply of local concerns, competing issues, and strong egos with devoted personal followings.

And you will find no unanimity among the electorate -- as you do not find it on this campus -- on the issues that

you see as absolutely vital and transparently clear. There will be some victories -- and some defeats.

Thus you must resist the notion that if you stand in the middle of the campus quadrangle or out in the streets and blow your trumpet loud enough ... the walls will come tumbling down. Political victories are made of far more than instant causes ... or fiery rhetoric ... or "men on horseback" with simplistic answers.

The real choices never quite boil down to the simple extremes of making either love or war ... uniting or dying ... being either Red or dead ... or making just guns or just butter. Politics requires a sacrifice far harder than that of time -- it requires that you sacrifice the reassuring formulas that tell you, "don't worry about the alternatives, everything is neatly simplistic, and a given proposition is absolutely right!"

And I would ask you to think very hard about the point at which sacrificing yourselves to the demands of conscience amounts to self-destruction. Moral imperatives may become so sharply drawn as to narrow the alternatives to passivity on the one hand, or violence on the other. This, too, is a dimension of the syndrome of "future shock" -- this pathology that shades off into total desolation, or suddenly bursts out in mindless rage.

In the personal histories of the young, we have seen too many cases of just such a regression -- from an intense passion for justice, to acts wholly without that sense of compassion on which all human justice ultimately depends.

One must also resist the tendency toward moral arrogance. Frankly, it turns off many potential allies -- many of whom have fought long and hard for the things students seek, and have the battle-scars to prove their commitment.

Rather than arrogance, it is necessary to cultivate tolerance and mutual respect. Freedom, in the open forum of the campus and as a principle of political and social life, is twice significant -- once in the fight to attain it, and again, in the use that is made of it. If your enjoyment of freedom or mine contemplates denying it to others, we will end up "freeing" ourselves right into 1984!

These are some of the thoughts I would leave with you. But the really important question only you can answer -- and that is, what do you want to become?

For some, the question should be posed in its sharpest and most painful form: are you opting to become participating members of this society at all, to share in its culture and institutions, to assume responsibility for the follies and tragedies as well as the achievements of our Nation?

I instinctively believe you will say "yes" -- that with deepening perception and lengthening perspective, you will discover and rediscover your answers. But for each one of you, it has to be your answer. Meaning in life is not something you stumble on, like the prize in a game. It is not something you find stashed away in the bottom of whatever "single issue" bag you may jump into. It is not something that heroes or hero-worship simply give you, as a by-product of charisma.

You build it out of your schooling, out of affections and loyalties -- out of the experience of mankind as it is passed on to you. You build life's meaning out of defeats as well as victories, and out of the things and people you love.

Recently, a professor of history at one of your sister land-grant universities expressed this thought with particular eloquence. Let me read a portion of his message:

Society hangs together by the stitching of many threads. No 18-year-old is simply the product of his 18 years. He is the product of three thousand years of the development of mankind -- and throughout these years, injustice has existed and been fought; rules have grown outmoded and been changed; doom has hung over men and been avoided; unjust wars have occurred; pain has been the cost of progress -- yet man has persevered.

For me, meaning has come in the pursuit of the political craft. But it can come in many ways, in many callings.

Making our society work certainly does not mean that all of you will have to be full-time politicians for the course of your lives. If indeed your life has meaning, you will develop the balance that comes from richness and variety of experience. And then you will be able to weigh in on political issues with the kind of persistent moral sensitivity and tough-minded judgment that our society so desperately needs.

Had this been an open dialogue rather than a formal address, one of you would surely have asked by now -- But how much time do we have? Can we afford a longer view? Can we really trust that our elders will have the competence to let us survive long enough to live as you suggest?

My answer is of the most realistic sort -- How can you possibly afford not to? It may be hard just now to have faith in the continuity and resourcefulness of our society -- in old and young, students and non-students, working together. But it is a faith immeasurably worth finding -- because every morning we do literally waken to a new, a changed America, and it is a faith that must eternally be renewed.

Genuinely and without complacency ... I think I see, arising from turmoil and dissent, new signs of sanity -- impatience with extreme rhetoric, rededication to working within legitimate channels, and a rediscovery of the potency

of the democratic process. And this sense of continuity is absolutely basic.

No matter what we do, our waters and air will not be cleaned in a year or two -- but they might be in ten, if we work at it. No matter what we do, we cannot establish racial justice or redesign our society in a year or two -- but I promise you, if you show staying power, you will change the face of American politics.

I say this even though I am amazed at some "doomsday" rumors that now run free among some of our despondent youth. There is no sudden, new reason -- be it the bomb, or environmental abuses, or racial tension -- for young people to believe that they will not be here fifteen years from now, or that society and government are beyond repair, or that by 1985 our ecological system will be destroyed.

These false prophecies that mankind will soon self-destruct will not be fulfilled -- because we will not let it happen -- because the youth of the Nation will not let it happen, and we all can and must take action now to see that it does not happen.

In a larger sense, of course, a Nation's problems never will be solved -- all at once, and for all time. Utopias are hard to come by. As soon as one social agenda is resolved, another will emerge, and yet another. But I think we can

perceive a steady escalation in the plateau upon which and from which we operate -- so that, always, we move from lower to higher ground ... from justice to more nearly perfect justice. Indeed, in the sum, that really has been the substance of the American experience.

When historians write of this fantastic age, they may say, with Dickens:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. Everything was over, and yet everything was just beginning.

But we must say:

We were there -- and we wouldn't have missed it.
Our lives had meaning. And we made a difference!